

Lessons from fish market sellers, cheese-seeking mice and moving penguins – building business short stories into management education

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Tales are short and business people have less and less time. Tales carry a universal moral, while managers look for basic principles. Tales are simple, and simplification is essential in business world. Good always wins in tales, while workers in the corporate world are success-oriented. In addition, the smallest one always wins in tales, and we all need such motivating examples. It is no wonder that an increasing number of short story business books (that also can be read during a short flight or train) has been published in the past decade.

Before we would sneer at the genre, it is worth seeing who the authors are – they include people with considerable scientific record such as Kotter–Rathgeber 2007, Blanchard–Johnson 2010, Johnson 2001, Lundin et al 2000.

Moreover, John P. Kotter, Professor at Harvard University has sold more of this book of his than any other. As he writes in the introduction of his book titled „Our Iceberg is Melting! – Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions”, a story of a penguin colony, short stories can be highly effective because they make serious, complicated and frightening ideas clear and comprehensible. Short stories are easy to remember, in spite of the vast amount of information we are bombarded with everyday – just to be forgotten by the next day. Short stories urge us to think, teach us important lessons, and stimulate everyone (young and old alike) to use the lessons drawn. If one thinks that an illustrated fun story is only for children, s/he will soon realize that this book is about real life problems which may concern almost everyone working in any sort of organization.

Therefore the present study argues that it would be important to incorporate short stories into management education since they possess advantages that classical study books and specialized textbooks do not. Short stories are short, exciting and easy to abstract, with advice that can be applied immediately. Furthermore, they are extremely inspiring.

Keywords: management education, short story, inspiration

1. Introduction

The present study summarizes the experiences of the most successful business short stories and a critical piece, a parody of one of them. (Blanchard–Johnson 1981, Brown 2000, Kotter–Rathgeber 2006, Lechter–Reid 2009, Lundin et al 2000, Johnson 1998).

Let us see these short stories, the provided management propositions, and the ways they can be built into education.

2. The formula of success

The majority of tales aim to explore universal morals. Such an example is „Three Feet from Gold”, a book by Sharon L. Lechter and Greg S. Reid. The title of the book is a reference to a story in „Think and Grow Rich”, a work by Napoleon Hill. Namely, this book does nothing else but copy what Napoleon Hill, a classic of motivation literature did just one hundred years ago; that is, it creates the formula of success from examples of successful people. Hill was twenty-five years old when he got the opportunity to make an interview with Andrew Carnegie, the richest American at the time. He provided Hill with a letter of recommendation

with which he could visit the five hundred most successful businessmen, politicians, scientists and clerical figures.

This time the protagonist of „Three Feet from Gold”, who incidentally had his own little marketing company according to the book, gets his letter of recommendation from the Napoleon Hill Foundation. The story features several successful people such as Truett Cathy, founder of the Chick-fil-A fast food chain, Mike Helton, president of the Nascar stock car races, boxing world champion Evander Holyfield, Frank Maguire, founder of Fedex Worldwide, Lauren Nelson, Miss America in 2007, Bob Proctor, author of „You Were Born Rich”, and so on. All of them give the character a great deal of advice, who then creates his formula of success accordingly:

„Success = ((P + T) x A x A) + F in which

P = Passion

T = Talent

A = Action

A = Association (that is, what is the field of your action)

F = Faith”.

3. Management in 1 minute

Two acknowledged experts with academic degrees, Spencer Johnson, PhD and Ken Blanchard, PhD are the authors of „The One Minute Manager”, which reached the number one spot of the New York Times bestseller list at the time. The book was regarded as the most unusual piece on the bestseller list, and it is no wonder because „The One Minute Manager” was published back in 1981, well before such books would have flooded the market.

Similarly to the book presented above, this story is about a young man looking for happiness. He hears about an outstanding manager from whom he could learn a lot. To his great surprise the manager always finds the time to see him – and this is a recurring motive in short stories as good people such as tutors always find the time.

When they first meet, the manager points out that he is the „one minute manager” who can bring forth significant results out of people within quite a little time. Then he gets the young man acquainted with five of his subordinates, who tell him about the methods of the manager that they themselves already use.

As it turns out, the three secrets of one-minute management are:

- one-minute goals
- one-minute praisings
- one-minute reprimands.

All of them certainly have their own rules, which are also summarized in the book, each in a page. In fact, we even see a flowchart, which lists exactly when and what a good manager should do.

4. Lessons from fish market sellers

Another story, a book titled „FISH!”, has become so popular that a whole business model was built around it, from seminars through speeches and films to special programmes.

Several managers may feel sympathy for the protagonist lady, Mary Jane Ramirez: she becomes a supervisor on the third floor, where her colleagues are lazy and pretentious zombies – slow, dull and repulsive. As Mary Jane explains, the energy level around her is equal to zero and she calls this a „toxic energy dump”.

For quite a while she does not even know how to deal with them, until she visits the market at Pike Place. To her shock in a positive sense, she sees a fish seller whose all workers do their job happily, and shoppers from the surrounding office buildings flock in great numbers.

Then the fish seller teaches her four rules:

1. The right attitude – We can always choose how we do our work, even if we often cannot choose the job itself.
2. Playfulness – Enjoy work which is boring and tiring for others.
3. Make the day – Involve our clients creatively.
4. Presence – We do not fantasize or make phone calls; we focus on the client completely.

The manager passes on the rules to his colleagues on the third floor, and he even prescribes them a compulsory visit to the fish market. Based on their experiences the colleagues then organize a special day, when they present how they can incorporate the ideas into their own work.

The inspiration of the story actually came from Pike Place Market, where one of the authors, John Cristensen recorded a short video, then wrote this Wall Street Journal Business bestseller with co-authors Harry Paul and Stephen C. Lundin, PhD.

5. The change management of penguins

Another bestseller, John P. Kotter's „Our Iceberg is Melting!“ is a book explaining change management through the story of a penguin colony. The Harvard Business School professor has also written several „classic“ textbooks, of which *Sense of Urgency* (Kotter 2009) and *Leading Change* (Kotter 1999) have also been published in Hungarian.

As a matter of fact, „Our Iceberg is Melting!“ provides an essence of these books in a shorter form, with plenty of pictures. But is not the only reason why it has become a bestseller: everyone can identify with the story of the penguins and notice his/her organization in it.

In the tale Fred notices that the iceberg where they have always lived may fall into pieces. But he is not in the situation to make any statement, or tell others what to do. He is not one of the colony leaders. However, he finds an ally in the Leadership Council and with her help changes start to take place in their home.

If the parallel with humans is not clear enough, it is reconfirmed from time to time in the story. The penguin called Professor is electrified and spends the whole morning preparing a PowerPoint presentation of about 97 slides, just to let Louis use it to present their prospects for the future. The penguins also create slogans that can be written on ice posters. The story points out that the culture in penguin colonies changes just as slowly as in human ones.

When Louis, the head penguin summarizes the story at the end of the book, we actually see a reoccurrence of the 8-step change management model already seen in Kotter's other titles: He explains how Fred has noticed that the iceberg was melting, then 1. how they have created a sense of danger in the colony, in order to tackle a difficult problem; 2. how they have formed a carefully selected group to manage change; 3. how they have found vision for the future that could be realized; 4. how they have communicated this vision to the others to make them understand and accept it; 5. how they have overcome as many obstacles as possible; 6. they have quickly achieved some sort of victory; 7. they have continued working until they managed to lay solid foundations for their new way of life; and finally 8. they have made sure that changes would not be overcome by stubborn, deeply ingrained traditions.

The head penguin also adds that the most important change of all is that so many colony members have become less and less worried about changes, learned the concrete steps that

were necessary to adapt to the new circumstances, and are now able to cooperate in order to move towards a better future.

It is obvious that the moral of the penguins' story is aimed at people. As Kotter and Rathgeber explains at the end of their book, short stories may be entertaining, but their power – just as in the penguin story – lies in the fact that they help us behave smarter: production is more effective, results are better, confusion is smaller, we see less stress, and the feeling that we keep things under control is stronger because we understand what is happening around us.

Some people have a way of thinking that enables them to process our tale about penguins automatically, notice the smart methods used by birds, re-think their personal experiences in the light of these methods, and see their opportunities regarding future. But everyone, even these people may profit more from the story if they reconsider and discuss it more consciously.

From software developers to managers, from housewives to clergymen, from high school students to pensioners many types of people have used the story of the penguins to more easily achieve what they want and what their companies or organizations need. The process can be successfully adapted to our own circumstances, too.

6. Cheese-seeking mice

However, if we are looking for the most successful business short story, it is probably not else but „Who Moved My Cheese?“ written by Spencer Johnson, mentioned above. The book was published in 1998, when all businessmen were occupied with change management, thus the subtitle „An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life“ hit the bull's eye. It soon made the New York Times bestseller list, and stayed there for five years! It was translated into 42 languages and sold in 23 million copies.

In the book we can follow the story of two mice, Sniff and Scurry, and two humans, Hem and Haw, who are looking for cheese in a maze. Of course the cheese is symbolic: it is the metaphor of all we can wish for in life, be it a job, a relationship, money, a nice house, freedom, health, acknowledgement, the peace of mind, or any kind of activity such as jogging or golf. The maze in the story symbolizes the space where we strive to achieve our aims most of the time.

The metaphorical story in brief: the two mice and two humans find a cheese in cheese storehouse S. The humans get lazy after a while, and when they find no cheese in the place, collapse. While Hem does not do anything, Haw, however slowly, gets himself together and starts to search for another cheese. Then he remembers the times when he had felt best in the maze – always when he progressed. From that moment he only concentrates on what he could win if he went ahead, and never on what he could lose. After he visualizes his aim, that is, to find a new cheese, he manages to get the cheese. However though, Haw does not manage to mobilize Hem, who explains that he does not believe he would like the taste of the New Cheese, because it is just not what he is used to. This symbolizes that most people stick to the status quo.

Nevertheless, Haw summarizes his most important experiences, which could be the favourite of change managers. For example: „Change happens. They keep moving the cheese.“ „Anticipate change. Get ready for the cheese to move“, and „Adapt to change quickly. The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you can enjoy new cheese“.

Then, at the end of the book, the story-teller of the tale discusses with his friends this story of two mice and two humans, and draws further conclusions. He realizes that maybe it would be worth to change the way he works instead of changing his workplace, and an organization or a group of people is only able to change if a sufficient number of its members change.

Last but not least, the work has become the core of an entire „marketing machine”: they created a training programme based on it, it was put on film, and the author has also written versions for children and teenagers.

7. How seriously can they be taken?

As business short stories gained popularity, their critics have also appeared, arguing that the whole thing is humbug. „Who Moved My Cheese?” got its own parody titled „Who Cut the Cheese?, A Cutting-Edge Way of Surviving Change by Shifting the Blame”. In the latter book we can also follow a story of four characters (two rats: Whiff and Ditch, and two puny people: Duck and Cover) searching for cheese.

As the promotional description of the book explains, readers should learn from the uncrowned king of career advisors, whose slogan – all profitable jobs can be learned during a commercial break – has inspired millions of middle-level managers to make a fool of themselves during weekend business training programmes focusing on motivation. The motto of the author, Mason Brown, J.D, states that the 21st century revolution of organizational theory is how to avoid changes by shifting the blame on others. He also adds that fortunately, however big the problem is, one can always find someone to blame for it as dupes are always there.

8. Summary: incorporating business short stories into management education

No matter how much criticism we see, most of these books can be well incorporated into management education programmes. Experiences also show that students are grateful for it because educative short stories usually communicate the same information as textbooks, but in a much more interesting and compact form.

It is also much easier to make an abstract of such books. It is true that they are focused on only one or a couple of basic notions, and do not contain as much information as technical books or textbooks. However, the most important point is not the amount of knowledge, but the possibility that the morals of the books will become a part of the students’ way of thinking, and the stories will help them gain inspiration and motivation.

Of course this all can be seen and measured in the long term. It is for sure that the teachers of the Budapest College of Communication, Business and Arts (BKF) Marketing Institute do their best to be in the vanguard of applying new educational methods. Among others, this effort is also demonstrated by the following publications: (Dér 2010, Kunsági-Varsányi 2009, Kunsági-Varsányi 2011, Papp-Váry 2010, Rekettye-Papp-Váry 2010).

We hope that the present study will be a useful part of the series, and will hopefully serve as some inspiration for both students and instructors of management as a subject.

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